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CHAPTER XV.

"It Was Dreadful in the Forest."

I HAVE said—or perhaps I have not said, for my memory plays me sad tricks these days—that I glowed with pride when three such men as my comrades thanked me for having saved or at least greatly helped the situation. As the youngster of the party, not merely in years, but in experience, character, knowledge and all that goes to make a man, I had been overshadowed from the first. And now I was coming into my own. I warmed at the thought. Alas for the pride which goes before a fall! That little glow of self-satisfaction, that added measure of self-confidence, was to lead me on that very night to the most dreadful experience of my life, ending with a shock which turns my heart sick when I think of it.

It came about in this way: I had been unduly excited by the adventure of the tree, and sleep seemed to be impossible. Summerlee was on guard, sitting hunched over our small fire, a quaint, angular figure, his rifle across his knees and his pointed, goatlike beard wagging with each weary nod of his head. Lord John lay silent, wrapped in the South American poncho which he wore, while Challenger stood with a roll and rattle which reverberated through the woods. The full moon was shining brightly, and the air was crisply cold. What a night for a walk! And then suddenly came the thought, "Why not?" Suppose I stole softly away, suppose I made my way down to the central lake, suppose I was back at breakfast with some record of the place. Would I not in that case be thought an even more worthy associate? Then if Summerlee carried the day and some means of escape were found we should return to London with first hand knowledge of the central mystery of the plateau, to which I alone of all men would have penetrated. I thought of Gladys, with her "There are heroisms all round us." I seemed to hear her voice as she said it. I thought also of McAdie. What a three column article for the paper! What a foundation for a career! A correspondence in the next great war might be within my reach. I dived at a gun-my pockets were full of cartridges—and, parting the sheep bushes at the gate of our garden, quickly slipped out. My last glance showed me the unconscious Summerlee, most futile of sentinels, still nodding away like a queer mechanical toy in front of the smoldering fire. He was fast asleep.

The night had been exceedingly still, but as I advanced I became conscious of a low, rumbling sound, a continuous murmur, somewhere in front of me. This grew louder as I proceeded, until at last it was clearly quite close to me. When I stood still the sound was constant, so that it seemed to come from some stationary cause. It was like a boiling kettle or the bubbling of some great pot. Soon I came upon the source of it, for in the center of a small clearing I found a lake—or a pool, rather, for it was not larger than the basin of the Trafalgar square fountain—of some black, pitchlike stuff, the surface of which rose and fell in great blisters of burning gas. The air above it was shimmering with heat, and the ground round was so hot that I could hardly bear to lay my hand on it. It was clear that the great volcanic outburst which had raised the strange plateau so many years ago had not yet entirely spent its forces. Blackened rocks and mounds of lava I had already seen everywhere peeping out from amid the luxuriant vegetation which draped them, but this asphalt pool in the jungle was the first sign that we had of actual existing activity on the slopes of the ancient crater. I had no time to examine it further, for I had need to hurry if I were to be back in camp in the morning.

It was a fearsome walk and one which will be with me so long as memory holds. In the great moonlight clearings I sunk along among the shadows on the margin. In the jungle I crept forward, stooping with a beating heart, whenever I heard, as I often did, the crash of breaking branches as some wild beast went past. Now and then great shadows loomed up for an instant and were gone—great, silent shadows which seemed to prowl upon padded feet. How often I stopped with the intention of returning, and yet every time my pride conquered my fear and sent me on again until my object should be attained.

At last my watch showed that it was in the morning. I saw the gleam of water amid the openings of the jungle, and ten minutes later I was among the reeds upon the borders of the central lake. I was exceedingly dry, so I lay down and took a long draft of its waters, which were fresh and cold. There was a broad pathway with many tracks upon it at the spot which I had found, so that it was clearly one of the drinking places of the animals. Close to the water's edge there was a huge isolated block of lava. Up this I climbed, and, lying on the top of this block, I had an excellent view in every direction.

Lake Gladys—my own lake—lay like a sheet of quicksilver before me, with a reflected moon shining brightly in the center of it. It was shallow, for in many places I saw low sand banks protruding above the water. Everywhere upon the still surface I could discern signs of life, sometimes the gleam

of a great silver sided fish in the air, sometimes the arched, slate colored back of some passing monster. Once upon a yellow sand bank I saw a creature like a huge swan, with a clumsy body and a high, flexible neck, shuffling about upon the margin. Presently it plunged in, and for some time I could see the arched neck and darting head undulating over the water. Then it died, and I saw it no more.

My attention was soon drawn away from these distant sights and brought back to what was going on at my very feet. Two creatures like large armadillos had come down to the drinking place and were squatting at the edge of the water, their long, flexible tongues, like red ribbons, shooting in and out as they lapped. A huge deer, with branching horns, a magnificent creature, which carried itself like a king, came down with its doe and two fawns and drank beside the armadillos. No such deer exist anywhere else upon earth, for the moose or elk which I have seen would hardly have reached its shoulders. Presently it gave a warning snort and was off with its family among the reeds, while the armadillos also scuttled for shelter. A newcomer, a most monstrous animal, was coming down the path.

For a moment I wondered where I could have seen that ungainly shape, that arched back with triangular fringes along it, that strange, birdlike head held close to the ground. Then it came back to me. It was the stegosaurus—the very creature which Maple White had preserved in his sketch-book and which had been the first object which arrested the attention of Challenger! There he was, perhaps the very specimen which the American artist had encountered. The ground shook beneath his tremendous weight, and his gulping of water resounded through the still night. For five minutes he was so close to my rock that by stretching out my hand I could have touched the hideous waving humples upon his back. Then he lumbered away and was lost among the bowlders.

Looking at my watch, I saw that it was half past 2 o'clock and high time, therefore, that I started upon my homeward journey. There was no difficulty about the direction in which I should return, for all along I had kept the little brook upon my left, and it opened into the central lake within a stone's throw of the bowlder upon which I had been lying. I set off, therefore, in high spirits, for I felt that I had done good work and was taking back a fine budget of news for my companions.

I was plodding up the slope, turning these thoughts over in my mind, and had reached a point which may have been halfway home when my mind was brought back to my own position by a strange noise behind me. It was something between a snore and a growl, low, deep and exceedingly menacing. Some strange creature was evidently near me, but nothing could be seen, so I hastened more rapidly upon my way. I had traversed half a mile or so when suddenly the sound was repeated, still behind me, but louder and more menacing than before. My heart stood still within me as it flashed across me that the beast, whatever it was, must surely be after me. I was petrified with terror.

I stood like a man paralyzed, still staring at the ground which I had traversed. Then suddenly I saw it. There was movement among the bushes at the far end of the clearing which I had just traversed. A great dark shadow disengaged itself and hopped out into the clear moonlight. I say "hopped" advisedly, for the beast moved like a kangaroo, springing along in an erect position upon its powerful hind legs, while its front ones were held bent in front of it. It was of enormous size and power, like an erect elephant, but its movements, in spite of its bulk, were exceedingly alert. For a moment, as I saw its shape, I hoped that it was an Iguanodon, which I knew to be harmless, but, ignorant as I was, I soon saw that this was a very different creature. Instead of the gentle, deer shaped head of the great three toed, leaf-eating beast had a broad, squat, toadlike face like that which had alarmed us in our camp. His ferocious cry and the horrible energy of his pursuit both assured me that this was surely one of the great flesh eating dinosaurs, the most terrible beasts which have ever walked this earth.

Even now when I think of that nightmare the sweat breaks out upon my brow. What could I do? My useless fowling piece was in my hand. What help could I get from that? I looked desperately round for some rock or tree, but I was in a bushy jungle with nothing higher than a sapling within sight, while I knew that the creature behind me could tear down a tree, my only possible chance lay in flight. I could not move swiftly over the rough, broken ground, but as I looked round me in despair I saw a well marked, hard beaten path which ran across in front of me. We had seen several of the sort, the runs of various wild beasts, during our expeditions. Along this I could perhaps hold my own, for I was a fast runner and in excellent condition. Flinging away my useless gun, I set myself to do such a half

mile as I have never done before or since. My limbs ached, my chest heaved, I felt that my throat would burst for want of air, and yet with that horror behind me I ran and I ran and ran. At last I paused, hardly able to move. For a moment I thought that I had thrown him off. The path lay still behind me. And then suddenly, with a crashing and a rending, a third, ding of giant feet and a panting of monster lungs, the beast was upon me once more. He was at my very heels. I was lost.

Madman that I was to linger so long before I fled! Up to then he had hunted by scent, and his movement was slow. But he had actually seen me as I started to run. From then onward he had hunted by sight, for the path showed him where I had gone. Now, as he came round the curve, he was springing in great bounds. The moonlight shone upon his huge projecting eyes, the row of enormous teeth in his open mouth and the gleaming fringe of claws upon his short, powerful forearms. With a scream of terror I turned and rushed wildly down the path. Behind me the thick, gasping breathing of the creature sounded louder and louder. His heavy footfall was beside me. Every instant I expected to feel his grip upon my back. And then suddenly there came a crash—I was falling through space, and everything beyond was darkness and rest.

As I emerged from my unconscious

ness—which could not, I think, have lasted more than a few minutes—I was aware of a most dreadful and penetrating smell. Putting out my hand in the darkness, I came upon something which felt like a huge lump of meat, while my other hand closed upon a large bone. Up above me there was a circle of starlit sky, which showed me that I was lying at the bottom of a deep pit. Slowly I staggered to my feet and felt myself all over. I was stiff and sore from head to foot, but there was no limb which would not move, no joint which would not bend. It was, as I have said, a pit with sharply sloping walls and a level bottom about twenty feet across. This bottom was littered with great goblets of flesh, most of which was in the last state of putridity. The atmosphere was poisonous and horrible. After tripping and stumbling over these lumps of decay I came suddenly against something hard, and I found that an upright post was firmly fixed in the center of the hollow. It was so high that I could not reach the top of it with my hand, and it appeared to be covered with grease.

Suddenly I remembered that I had a tin box of wax vestas in my pocket. Striking one of them, I was able at last to form some opinion of this place into which I had fallen. There could be no question as to its nature. It was a trap—made by the hand of man. The post in the center, some nine feet long, was sharpened at the upper end, and

was black with the stale blood of the creatures who had been impaled upon it. The remains scattered about were fragments of the victims, which had been cut away in order to clear the stake for the next who might blunder in. I remembered that Challenger had declared that man could not exist upon the plateau, since with his feeble weapons he could not hold his own against the monsters who roamed over it.

But now it was clear enough how it could be done. In their narrow mouthed caves the natives, whoever they might be, had refuges into which the huge saurians could not penetrate, while with their developed brains they were capable of setting such traps, covered with branches, across the paths which marked the run of the animals as would destroy them in spite of all their strength and activity. Man was always the master.

The sloping wall of the pit was not difficult for an active man to climb, but I hesitated long before I trusted myself within reach of the dreadful creature which had so nearly destroyed me.

How did I know that the beast was not lurking in the nearest clump of bushes, waiting for my reappearance? I took heart, however, as I recalled a conversation between Challenger and Summerlee upon the habits of the great saurians. Both were agreed that the monsters were practically brain-

less, that there was no room for reason in their tiny cranial cavities and that if they had disappeared from the rest of the world it was assuredly on account of their own stupidity, which made it impossible for them to adapt themselves to changing conditions.

I clambered to the edge of the pit and looked over. The stars were fading, the sky was whitening, and the cold wind of morning blew pleasantly upon my face. I could see or hear nothing of my enemy. Slowly I climbed out and sat for awhile upon the ground, ready to spring back into my refuge if any danger should appear. Then, reassured by the absolute stillness and by the growing light, I took my courage in both hands and stole back along the path which I had come. Some distance down it I picked up my gun and shortly afterward struck the brook which was my guide. So, with many a frightened backward glance, I made for home.

(Continued Next Wednesday)

TWO AUTOISTS PAY FIVE DOLLAR FINES

Sam Shapiro, jitney driver, who was arrested several days ago on a charge of speeding, was again arraigned this morning, as his case has been continued. This morning he entered a plea of guilty and was fined \$5 by Police Magistrate Smith. Frank Mc-

Guckin, Jr., 2539 Seventh avenue, was also assessed \$5. He was arrested on the complaint of Herman Zuehl, who charged young McGuckin with careless driving.

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